ANARCHISM

In The May Movement, France '68

6p

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Anarchism in the May movement, France '68.

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INTERVIEWS

1. Gabriel Cohn-Bendit

Q. Until the May Days, it was thought that in France there were still only some old anarchists continuing the cult of Ravachol, of Kropotkin, and of the Bonnot Gang. Now it is suddenly realised that people can be nineteen years old and anarchists. How do you explain this?

* It often happens that anarchism is passed from father to son. This isn't what happened with me but it did happen with some of my comrades. The Spanish War gave rise to a whole generation of anarchists. The children of these militants are now young people who were brought up in this enviroment, in this tradition and with these ideas. Those who are not in this category, come to anarchism through a more modern ideological evolution. First they are Marxists and they join the Communist Party. There they get their first revolutionary education. They read Marx, Engels, Lenin: Stalin---and Mao Tse-tung not so long ago---and they begin to study the history of the Russian revolution. It is through this path that they break with Stalinism. They discover that things aren't as simple as the party manuals try to make out. They aren't happy with the summary condemnation of Trotsky and they want to go further into the matter. They begin to read Trotsky's work and from there they begin a criticism of Stalinism. In my own case, for example, I and some other people analysed Soviet Society according to Marxist methods. You then realise that soviet society is a class society, that its machinery of production has not resolved any of the problems raised by socialism. From there you put the revolutionary attitude of the French Communist Party on trial, and try to find the reasons why it has been betrayed by the party leadership. After this criticism of Stalin, you go still further. You go back to Lenin and Trotsky, to Marx as well, and realise that if socialism could degenerate in the Soviet Union it is because the authoritarian principle was accepted by the theoreticians of socialism.

Q. That doesn't explain how you can be an anarchist today.

* The question I would ask is how one cannot be an anarchist, above all today. Everything which has just happened, this movement which has convulsed France and which is said to be about to overflow into other countries, is confirmation of all the main themes of anarchism:

1. The spontaneity of the masses:

You have to be blind not to see it. During the May days, anyone could take a red or black flag on the Boulevard Saint-Michel and be followed by dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of young people.

2. The role of minorities:

This was exemplified in the movement. It is not a question ---as in the Jacobin or Leninist tradition--- of a minority organised as an army and designed to take power. To this tradition is opposed that of anarchism -- a minority which causes an incident and leaves the masses with the job of extending it. It is a question not of imposing its authority on society but of giving society the opportunity of moving forward.

3. The unlimited general strike:

For decades we have been told that this was utopian, and suddenly, despite the trade union leadership, it became a reality. Against the trade unions.

4. Self Management:

Today everyone is talking about it as a normal thing. Here again, they used to say it was utopian.

5. Factions:

It has been proved that they are simply a method of maintaining order.

Q. In a democracy there must surely be elections. Representatives must surely be chosen to take national decisions.

* That isn't so. No one can speak in the name of anyone else, except to give immediate expression to a decision which was taken together. For representation to be real, it must be limited to a single decision and be immediately revocable. I don't see why, even in a socialist system, a Strasbourg grocer or a Gers peasant should take a decision about a change in the organisation of Saint-Nazaire shipyards. It is for the people who work in the shipyards to say what they want and how they propose to live.

Q. But even so, there must be co-ordination on a national scale.

* Of course. Each unit of production can choose a council, from which it is possible to draw assemblies of towns, of regions and of countries, but these representatives must operate under the permanent control of their base. It is the represented who must take decisions and if the representative doesn't agree, he is replaced.

Q What books and writers have you got these ideas from?

* At first I hadn't read much anarchist literature, but I defended these ideas and people called me an anarchist. Then I accepted this description and began to read the theorists. You naturally begin by reading the "Unknown Revolution" by Voline. A little Bakunin, a little Kropotkin. It is difficult to get hold of their works today. There are some collections of anarchists texts which have been published recently, such as that of Daniel Guerin+. You find out, for example, that some texts of Bakunin throw much light on our understanding of the Russian Revolution; much more than those of Marx. But in the end, the ideas you pick up from this or that writer are not much use. We really get our education from the experience of others and from what we experience ourselves.

Q Do you explicitly relate yourself to Marxism?

* This, oddly enough, depends on the age of the anarchist. The old generation of anarchists condems all the ideologies of Communism together. They mix them all up. For them, Marx is to be rejected as much as Stalin. Just as, for Marxists, anarchists are all petit-bourgeois so, for the old anarchists, Marxists are all Stalinists. The young [illegible]hists anarchists, however, accept the Marxist criticism of production. But they still reject a lot of Marx. To begin with, we reject the role which is given to the state during the transitory period between capitalism and socialism, because it is through this theoretical justification that you came to [illegible] Stalinism. We also leave on one side everything that seems obviously false in Marxism, such as the analysis of cyclic economic changes and crises. The events we have just lived through prove this: a revolutionary situation doesn't necessarily derive from economic imbalance. Anyway capitalism has found ways to deal with these crises which threaten it. For my part, I also deny the role which Marxism gives to the working class as the only revolutionary class. When the mass of the workers is reduced to 15% of the active population, it is difficult to see what it can do on its own.

Q Anarchist tradition is also anti-religious. Do young anarchists keep up this opposition to religion?

* Anarchist tradition is not only anti-religious, it is also anto-militarist. For the old anarchist, the real struggle against capitalism begins with the destruction of religion. But in the end they take this to absurd [illegible]

+ See ANARCHY 94, review of Daniel Guerin, Ni dieu ni maitre.

extremes. As for us, we try to see things more clearly. It is obvious that the domination of the bourgeoisie is expressed as much by force as by ideology, and that it will use every weapon including religion as an instrument of domination. It is not the temporal power of the church which is dangerous, but the spiritual power of all churches, whether they're Christian or technocratic. The bourgeoisie inculcates ideas into young people, into society and then does what it wants. It is more effective to convince people that it is wrong to resist their rulers than it is to use the police to defend rulers.

Q Another traditional characteristic of anarchists is that they follow their ideas even in the present society. Are the young as rigid as their elders?

* It is true that the anarchist minority sees itself as a model of future society. The anarchists don't accept compromises at a personal level. The individualists, for example, refuse to form groups, For them, you must change individuals first -- but to tell the truth all this is rather out of date. I am married, I have children, I live like a bourgeois and this isn't very much in accordance with the sexual and social ideas of anarchism. But sometimes we really do live as if we were in the society we want. Thus, for example, in the March 22 Movement, all cars and bicycles which the members possess are held in common whenever it is necessary and everyone uses them when they need to.

Q Is this the anarchist society?

* The main task of the anarchist criticism is to put power on trial. Primarily the power of a minority over a majority but also the power of the majority over a minority. Its other task is to challenge the hierarchy --the power of the boss, the teacher, the parents.

Q You challenge the role of the leader in history?

* It is not the leaders who make history; they are leaders because they express at a particular moment what the group wants -- or else they dominate. It is the truth of the moment which creates leaders of the moment. Thus for ten years I have expressed the same ideas as my brother. All that was needed was the conjunction of favourable circumstances and he was able to express what the group wanted.

Q You deny the role of the individual?

* No, but I give it to many individuals. The bourgeoisie are prepared to accept leaders because it reassures them. We think that people should be trusted and that they can decide their own fate.

Q But surely history proves you wrong. All ages up to now have witnessed the progressive strengthening of the state. If we are to move towards anarchism, it would be evolution in reverse.

* Anarchism has never said that the state would not become strong. It has said that we should struggle against this phenomenon. After all, no one in a developed society can really control the stete apparatus. They try, but they don't succeed. You have to confine people in a more and more oppressive rationality to make them accept power, but the resistance to this power still becomes more and more serious and in the end participation is needed by the state itself. We don't put on trial the coordination of the various activities of society. This coordination is neccesary, but the centralisation of power is unacceptable. Coordination leads to information, centralisation leads to domination. For a long time people have not claimed their freedom. But today they are beginning to do so. Things are being decided without them and they don't understand it. They want to understand.

Q Do you think that we shall live to see an anarchist society?

* I don't know anything about whether we shall live to see it. If I can't it's a pity but that's just too bad. It won't change anything I believe. I shall spend my life in confrontation and struggle. I don't even know whether a free society will ever be established. It is possible that it will never be created, but I do know that it is possible to create it. Neither the nonsense which is talked about human nature by those for whom people must always told what to do and the nonsense talked by those who speak of technical difficulties, need stand in the way. Before the May Days we were thought of as crazy but now the whole country has begun talking almost like us.

Q Including General de Gaulle?

* You don't have to participate in everything with anyone.

Q But there are historical precedents you can refer to?

* There is the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution at the beginning

Ukranian anarchism, Spain 1936.

Q Which add up only to defeats.

* That is true. What is needed is a conjunction of events which has not appeared so far. Until circumstances made the execution of Louis XVI possible the republic might have seemed impossible. Circumstances have not favoured the attempts which have been made, but it is feasible that Libertarian Socialism is the most difficult freedom to win.

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2. Daniel Cohn-Bendit

Q. It is said that you are or where an anarchist.

* I still am an anarchist. I was much influenced by my brother who went through all the groups of the extreme left after being expelled from the Communist Party. But it was above all through a negative reaction - rejecting all the sects of the extreme left and their dogmatism - that I first arrived at the anarchist position which enabled me to define my attitudes precisely by relating it to the Bolshevik Marxists-Leninists along the lines of "council Socialism".

Q. Your parents left Germany at the time of Nazism. You don't have French nationality?

* I have German nationality. But I don't give a damn about nationality.

Q. From what moment do you date the birth of your political consciousness?

* One thing affected me a lot. I was thirteen, it was 1958. There were five or six hundred thousanf people in the streets after May 13 (the right-wing putsch in Algeria), and even so the Gaullists came to power. And I couldn't understand.

Q. What did the Algerian war mean to you as a child which is what you still were?

* The birth of my political consciousness took place in a continuos process - the Algerian war, the things I read which made me conscious of political and social problems.

Q. You talk of the things you read. What is surprising in you and in so many for whom you are the spokesman, leader.....

.....Let's say 'the megaphone'.....

.....what is surprising is the political confusion of the mass of the student movement. There are Maoists, various Trotskyist groups, you are an anarchist. Which leaders do you recognize? what attitude do you take to the revolutionary theoreticians? Such as Marx?

* I am, if you like, a Marxist in the way Bakunin was. Bakunin translated Marx and for him Marx had not so much developed a new theory as formulated the possibilities of a revolutionary criticism of society on the basis of theories about bourgeois culture. Bakunin has had more influence on me. Above all, I think I made up my own mind on the basis of the Russian Revolution of the situation in the worker's commune in Kronstadt, where there were anarchists struggling against the heavy hand of the Bolsheviks on the soviets. In consequence I am very anti-Leninist I am against the organisational method of democratic centralism and for organisational federalism - for the federated autonomous groups which act together but still preserve their autonomy.

Q. Is this position the same as that of your comrades?

* In the March 22 Movement there are also Marxist-Leninists, and Trotskyists who are themselves very Leninist; but they make up only part of the movement.

Q. What seems clear is that with all of you there is a radical confrontation which applies to capitalist societies as well as the 'socialist' societies.

* True. There are three permanent themes - the struggle against state repression, against authoritarianism and against lierarchy. In view of the fact that these three phenomena may be found in both east and west, my opposition to the organisation forms of the societies in both east and west is total.

Q. So your confrontation is directed as much against Western capitalist civilisation as against Soviet society?

* For me, Soviet society is a form of government which has the characteristics of a class society; in my eyes the bureaucracy represents a class, so I am opposed to Soviet society just as I am opposed to capitalist society in France. However, I do not live in the USSR, I live here. So I carry on the fight here against the French bourgeoisie.

Q You are anti-Leninist. But there are also Trotsky, Mao, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara.....

* At the time of the repression of the Kronstadt commune, on Trotsky's orders, I am anti-Trotskyist. But when Trotsky makes himself the spokeman of the opposition to Stalin, I more or less follow his denunciation of the Russian bureaucracy. For me, however it doesn't go far enough. For Trotsky, the Russian state is a degenera ted workers' state; whereas for me, the bureaucracy represents a class. So it isn't a workers' state at all! My criticism of Soviet society is entirely Marxist - after analyzing the relationships of production and distribution in the USSR, you can see that these are not the relationships of socialist production: the Russian working class has no power to make decisions in production and distribution. For this reason the Soviet state for me is <u>still</u> a class state.

Q. Then we come to Maoism.

* Maoism--I'm not very sure what it is! I've read some bits and pieces in Mao which are very true. His thesis of relying on the peasantry has always been an anarchist thesis. Here there is no problem - even during the Russian Revolution. But now they have made mao into a myth. And I am not interested in talking about the myth of Mao, the little red book, the defense of Stalin etc. The Marxist-Leninists do that. That's their business. For me, it completely misses the point.

Q. What do you think of Stalin?

* You mean, what do I think of the CP? Stalin is Stalinism; it is really an absolute form of repression, a bureaucratic society which fights every form of working-class and even revolutionary confrontation.

Q. Is your rebellion against civilisation?

* I am not against civilisation. That is meaningless. I am against the nature of our society and against its forms of expression. Our civilisation is nothing but the form of expression of the nature of the system we live in.

Q. What are your aims?

* As follows. Through action, the problem of moving from theory to practice and from practice to theory is raised more clearly. When we realise this, we must now develop a new strategy of politics so as to be able to go on raising political problems; and when we raise these political problems, precise aims will emerge for us, in the universities and in the educational system generally and outside in our contact with the working class.

Q. Since the student world is mainly of bourgeois origin, one wonders whether this is a revolution of children who are playing at being leftists.

* What seems important to me now is to introduce politics into the student world, which is happening - and into the world of apprentices and unemployed young people who aren't even apprentices - to make possible the development of action involving radical confrontation with society, based precisely on the objective situation of our society which is unable (for good reason!) to find any place for its youth. Why? Because today our society, knowing what we know, (about politics etc), cannot make commercial use of its youth. That is all.

Q. Your attack is directed particularly against the teachers, who were the first to denounce the university structure.

* We don't challenge the teachers as such. We challenge their place in the university, as a cog in the machine. It is as this that we are opposed to them. There are attacks against some teachers, even against the courses of some teachers, against the political attitudes of some teachers. This seems quite normal to me.

Q. You consider the university system as the objective accomplice of the bourgeoisie. This is why you put it on trial. But isn't it therefore a matter of challenging western civilisation?

* If you like, but I would rather use another word. It is in the name of civilisation that the Occident Movement (a fascist group) wants to change everything. It is in the name of civilisation that De Gaulle acts; it is in the name of civilisation that Mitterand acts; it is in the name of civilisation that the communist party acts.

Q. But they are defending it, you are attacking it.

* I could reply that I am attacking precisely in the name of the scientific knowledge we have and don't make use of. For me, our society doesn't make use of its scientific and technical method for the liberation of man.

Q. What does the word 'socialism' mean for you?

* What do I think of what is called socialism? I am fighting to make socialism a reality. In my eyes that is the only way to live.

Q. You take some elements of your definition of socialism from Trotsky, from Mao?

* From Mao, in fact. For example, Mao breaks with strict Leninism when he relies on something outside the working class - the peasantry. Village communes are for us a form of organisation which is quite desirable.

Q. There is often talk about the influence on your movement of the American philosopher Marcuse.

* There has often been talk about the influence of Marcuse on the SDS (the socialist student movement). We are in contact with the SDS but there aren't ten people in the movement who have read Marcuse except perhaps 'Eros and

Civilisation'. In this criticism of capitalist society and his rejection of so-called "socialist" society, Marcuse is on the same lines as us. Especially because of three theses. He shows that it is the nature of society itself that is repressive and it isn't a matter of external forms of repression like the police. He shows that man is one dimensional, that is, our society makes man in its own image. Thirdly, he shows that the criticism and destrution are a beginning of construction and when you criticize something radically you are being constructive.

Q. Your criticism has been directed against several intellectual and teachers. Yet those who first prepared the way for you are people like Sartre, Camus (at one time at least), Merleau-Ponty (another existentialist philosopher). Are these people part of the bourgeois world for you?

* Let's take the example of Camus; he started the paper Combat with the subtitle "From the Resistance to the Revolution". Look what Combat has become today! It exists for you to say that Camus has influenced some young people. But today the problems that he raised - such as the absurdity of the world - it isn't in such terms that the majority of students who are active think of them; Camus is still a source, we read him but he doesn't have the same significance now. Neither does Sartre for that matter, nor does anyone else.

Q. You're strongly in favour of Vietnam and so is Sartre.....

* But everyone is in favour of Vietnam!.....all right, look, Sartre is in favour of Vietnam...that is great. But this doesn't mean that he still has the same influence on students. Sartre belongs to the postwar period. We are at another stage. The point is that young people today did not live through the post-war period, nor did the working class for that matter.

Q. Still, on the literary side it seems that surrealist challenge of the 1920's interests the Nanterre students a lot.

* The student movement is not a revolution but a rebellion. We agree - with surrealism and especially with Dada, because Dada was more radical and it does influence a section of the movement. But personally I am very much a "politico".

Q. Among the anarchists, which are those who have influenced you most?

* I have always defined myself as an anarchist by negation, by opposition to the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary tradition. The anarchists, if you like, have influenced me more by some of their works than by their theories. For example, Voline's book on the Russian revolution, Makhno's book on the Ukraine, the German descriptions of 1917, etc. In fact some thinkers like Pelloutier the founder of the CGT. I'm not going to mention a single anarchist thinker; I don't give a damn about theoreticians. There must be a theory which leads on to particular activity, but one doesn't think along with thinkers of two thousand years ago. In practice one relies on Marx and Bakunin, on Marcuse today, or Kolkowski (the dissident Polish Marxist). It is a fundemental error in studying the French student movement to search for some thinker who inspires our activity.

Q. Even so, aren't there any thinkers whose theories inspire your movement?

* No, there isn't any one thinker, or several. Every thinker counts for us. I could name Aristole for you. Why not? Certainly - and when opposing education, you may be referred to Rousseau, who said it all! There - Rousseau is a thinker who influences us!

Q. But doesn't the thought of Guevara play a very important part at Nanterre?

* There again; what can one say about Che? He fought, he was in South America. There's nothing to say. I may be more or less in agreement with what goes on in Cuba. That isn't what is important. What is interesting is this: How can Cuba be practically isolated between the USSR and the Americans? It is also possible to talk about decisions of Fidel, of Che, etc, at particular times, but this amounts to pub talk. If you make a scientific analysis of the situation, you must first explain why Cuba is isolated, in the context of the double opposition of China-USA and China-USSR. These are the facts. Why is the workers' movement in Europe unable to break American imperialism and let the Vietnamese fight their own battles? These are the basic problems to consider.

Q. From Madrid to Berlin, from Warsaw to Rome, from Paris to London, all the students have questioned the socio-economic and cultural systems of their countries. What relations do you have with the other European movements? And what similarities are there between you and them?

* There are very important relations between the movements in Germany and France, struggling against the bourgeois and capitalist state. We have demonstrated our solidarity with the SDS because their struggle really overlaps with ours. They have also demonstrated their solidarity with us. Briefly, we are in close contact with them and for us in this struggle we must have an internationalism which no Communist Party of any kind has really achieved. For us the struggle - not just for students but of other people to - must be on a European scale. In Warsaw where there is an obvious revival of Stalinism, there is the same problem. In Prague there is liberalisation because the Czechoslovaki economy was quite dead. So the liberalisation is taking place because there is a rebirth of the "capitalist" base. It isn't quite a bourgeois liberalisation but the Church is reviving etc. That is not what is interesting. But in the Student world, as well as among Czech workers a confrontation is developing on the left of the regime which wants precisely the establishment of workers' councils. That is what is important.

Q. It is sometimes said that the working class doesn't feel involved in your activity, especially in Paris. Why?

* That is the wrong question. Just because students come into the streets, workers won't all say "Hurray, they are right to fight!!" We are all in a situation of crisis embittered by capitalism. The workers will come into the streets themselves, just as they did in the wild-cat strikes in England. The problem will be raised when the workers come up against an objective situation which makes them move; then there will be a joining as in Italy, when the students picketed Fiat. The/the n workers knew which side the students were on. No one says that it is the same everywhere! I have never pretended that in Paris we live in a post-Stalinist or Fascist period. The fact is that all Students are rebelling against a repressive state.

Q. Will you succeed in constructing a revolutionary theory adapted to the present age?

* We have developed methods of action but we have not put forward a theoretical elaboration. This is necessary. If the Nanterre movement collapses, it will possibly recover in other places with other people. That doesn't matter. It will simply prove that we are incapable of developing this theory. Kronstadt was crushed by the Red Army! But we are not afraid of that. It'll begin again in another place - in another way. It would mean thatwe made mistakes. But this can be found out only in action, in real practice.

++++++

COMRADES!

Join the anarchists in their struggle for the abolition of the system of exploitation and of the apparatus of state coercion!

Don't put your rights into the hands of the politicians who lead all revolutions into the dead-end of Parliamentary democracy! Reject the absurd pretensions of the Marxists who direct the libertarian aspirations of the masses into the concrete structures of the Bolshevik ghettoes!

Dont't obey any more directives from the reformist unions which are trying in vain to exploit for their own profit a great spontaneous liberation movement, at a time when CGT members on the orders of the indescribable Seguy turned over to the police the student militants who came to talk to them on the night of May 24-25!

Join the anarchists! Long live the direct action of the workers and students!

Long live libertarian socialism!

(Sorbonne anarchist leaflet, May 1968)

COMRADES!

The French Anarchist Federation unites under the black flag of anarchy all the free and responsible men in the country. Madmen, nihilists and extremists at any price, have nothing to do with the anarchists. On the contrary, free people should take account of the long and profitable trickery of the political parties and their trade unions and join our ranks in order to brink about by direct action the victorious insurrection of liberty! As in the Ukraine 1917! As in Spain 1936! Liberty or Death! Long Live Anarchy!
(Sorbonne anarchist leaflet, May 1968).

This pamphlet wasreprinted on November 26 1973.